

Tap into Spring with Birch Syrup

By Julie Miedtke, University of Minnesota Extension Service

The signs of spring are everywhere with the last of the snow piles receding and ice leaving the lakes. Maple syrup season, a true sign of spring in the Itasca area has now come to an abrupt halt, with night time temperatures in the 40's. There is no question that folks love maple syrup- but did you know that you can tap Birch as well?

Folks have been seeking this sweet sap of the north in Alaska, Canada and in a few saavy Minnesotans to create many value-added products. Birch sap has been used to create a unique syrup, candy, wine, beer, marinades and other foods. It is a prized product for gourmets looking for a natural compliment to accompany wild game. In addition, Birch sap straight from the tree is a traditional refreshing spring tonic, comparable to mineral water, that is sold commercially in Scandinavia, Russia, China and savored in Finland, Korea, Japan and the Ukraine. The sap can be drunk as is, or used instead of water to make other beverages like tea, or coffee.

John Zasada, a forest researcher that has extensively studied Birch, and has helped the booming birch syrup cottage industry in Alaska comments, "There are unique, fundamental qualities of birch sap. Unlike maple, which consists of sucrose, birch sap consisting of fructose along with vitamins and minerals that include vitamin C, Potassium, manganese, thiamin and calcium." In addition, Zasada continues, "The tapping season for birch is when the sap rises in april until the trees bud. Tapping the trees doesn't injure them as it takes only 10-15% of the total sap production of the trees. And depending on the site and the weather, it may take up 80-100 gallons of sap to produce 1 gallon of birch syrup, while maple syrup requires 40 gallons of sap to produce 1 gallon of syrup."

To help people interested in extending their syrup operation, or to learn more about this sticky business, a workshop will be held on Tuesday, April 25, 2006 at the Forest History Center in Grand Rapids, Minnesota from 6:30 p.m. -8:00 p.m. Instruction will include tips and techniques on tapping, collecting and processing birch sap. There is a fee and a portion of the class will be outdoors, participants will want to dress appropriately. To register for the class, which is sponsored by the University of Minnesota Extension Service, the Minnesota Forestry Association and the Itasca Woodland Committee, phone 218-327-7486.